

A culture of caring: how law firms' long-term sustainability depends on DE&I



Liliana Chang, a partner in the corporate department at the U.S. based law firm of Herrick, Feinstein LLP shares her experiences of diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace and discusses how law firms must work to create and maintain a culture of caring to build long-term sustainability and pursue the opportunities of an increasingly globalized commercial world.

Tell us about your background and your journey to become a lawyer.

“My parents are Chinese and I was born and raised in Venezuela before moving to New York at the age of 12 with two of my siblings. We attended school as international students. I obtained my Bachelor of Business Administration degree from the Macaulay Honors College. At that time, few schools offered scholarships or awarded financial aid to international students, but Macaulay was the exception. I was fortunate to secure a full scholarship and sponsorship for several study abroad programs.

With respect to my professional path, I never really planned to work in law. My background was in finance and investments. I interned at several financial institutions while in college and realized that the banking environment was not a fit. After college, my sisters and I had started a small family business, a learning center. We had always done well in school and valued education. The neighbourhood we lived in was very diverse with many immigrant families, like mine, whose parents did not speak English and were not able to help their children with their schoolwork. The goal of the learning center was to assist these children in meeting their academic needs and goals. The business was successful and continued to expand. My sisters returned to school to pursue their respective Master’s in Education and I felt that I could better contribute to the business if I attended law school. I would not only be able to handle the business aspect of the learning center but also the legal aspects, especially the contracts. Long story short, I was accepted to law school and became a NYC Bar Diversity Fellow. The program facilitated placing diverse first year law students at prominent law firms. After that, I had a conversation with my sisters about working at a law firm full time while continuing to support the tutoring business and here I am today. They still run the business successfully and I am still there for them when they need me.”

From your perspective, why should diversity matter to law firms?

“Diversity matters not only in law firms but in any business, school, organization and society. Diversity provides an organization with different points of view. Diversity in the workplace helps a company better serve its clients because of the employees’ varying perspectives, viewpoints and backgrounds. Diversity helps in providing an understanding of the current and emerging issues faced by a company and its clients, and what matters to a society overall. Every culture is different, and it is important to have an open mind and to understand others in order to build strong relationships, which is the bedrock of any business. So, diversity absolutely does matter. By fostering a *culture of caring*, the decisions a firm makes will organically encompass DE&I considerations. Working at a firm that embraces this culture, like Herrick, helps me develop stronger relationships with both colleagues and clients. I really think that embracing such a culture is the foundation for success for law firms.”

What is the single largest challenge you have had to overcome in your professional career as a lawyer?

“My biggest challenge involved understanding that I do fit in, not because I was not fitting in but because I always felt that my background was so different than my peers’. At an early age, it was not clear to me that being diverse was an asset. When you are a kid, all you think about is ‘*where do I fit it?*’ I was born to Chinese parents in Venezuela and my parents made sure my siblings and I learned about our culture. They were very strict about speaking only Chinese at home. I learned Spanish when I started school in Venezuela and learned English in junior high when I moved to New York. I took standardized tests for college and law school not in my first language, or my second language, but my third language. I received scholarships for both college and law school, and yet, it still was not clear to me that I was already successful. I think at Herrick was where I finally realized that I was doing okay and I was going to be fine.”

Did you have mentors, sponsors and/or a role models to help you develop in your career and do you currently serve as a mentor to others?

“My role models are the people who were my support system throughout my career including my friends at work and my office mate who really believed in me. Above all, my greatest role models are the members of my family, especially my mom. My mom is the strongest person in my world. There is nothing she cannot accomplish. She is not afraid of anything and she is the reason I am who I am. Despite the distance between us when we were living in different countries, her belief in me and in my capabilities remained unshaken. When I think of the strength and bravery that she demonstrated in relocating her children to give them access to a better life, there’s nothing more inspirational. My family is my support system.

Mentoring is a valuable process, but it does not always need to be a formal program. I do serve as a mentor to many people inside and outside of the firm. It is very important for me to mentor those in need and to remember that my path was not easy. It is my job to help others succeed. By caring, I pay it forward. At work, I treat others not only as colleagues, but as friends, which is the best way I can support them. My friends know that I am always accessible and that they can trust me. I think that is all part of building on a caring culture.”

What advice would you offer to firms that are struggling to integrate DE&I into their talent strategy?

“The culture of a firm is critical. Before I interviewed for a role at Herrick, I did my homework and reached out to contacts who worked at the firm. For me, the culture of a firm is the most important aspect of a firm – not the office locations or the clients, but culture. For many of us, we are in the office longer than we are at home, so spending this time with people who share my values and value me as an individual is critical.

Bringing in the right people is not the biggest hurdle. A lack of sensitivity is the biggest challenge to diversity, and often this will directly impact a firm’s ability to retain talent. Typically, issues arise because people are not aware of what may be deemed to be offensive. If the firm makes an effort to foster a caring culture, it is not impossible to attract, retain and promote diverse talent, but it takes time. Firms need to make that commitment and that commitment is driven by caring. My thought is that if you care, you will make it happen.”

Are you involved in your firm’s succession planning and how does a firm create a culture that promotes inclusion in their future leaders?

“I know that, as a young partner, I am involved in the succession planning in my firm in an indirect way. Personally, I feel confident to share my views and support succession planning by making my voice heard. I often ask questions and I know others hear me. The answers may not always be what I expect, but keeping an open mind is important for growth. A firm that takes the time to consider the views of its people gives me comfort and confidence. Herrick is my second home and I care for its growth and success. As I mentioned earlier, firm creates a culture that promotes inclusion by simply caring.”

In a globalized world where technology continues to provide greater connectivity and new capabilities, law firms must remain focused on their people. By ensuring that hiring committees contain diverse partners, providing platforms and opportunities for colleagues to connect and speak honestly, and encouraging all employees to stay connected with regular wellbeing check-ins, DE&I will become stitched into the fabric of the firm. With this culture of caring, new joiners and existing partners will feel fulfilled and invested in the success of the firm to drive long-term growth and sustainability.

If you would like to discuss any of the topics raised in this article, please contact **George Wolf Jr.**